A Brief Study on Language Anxiety among Learners at Different Learning Stages in China

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Abstract

Anxiety is one of the most pervasive factors that may influence language achievement. From the analysis of the result of a quantitative and qualitative study, this study finds that Chinese English learners experience quite high level of language anxiety during their language acquisition process due to many specific reasons.

Key Words: Language Anxiety, English Achievement, Communication Apprehension, Fear of Negative Evaluation, Test Anxiety, General Uneasiness of English Class

Ellis (1997) points out that learner' personal variables and their affective states are of crucial importance in accounting for individual differences in learning outcomes. Affect is a starting machine that is responsible for setting the learning mechanism in motion and learning will run into difficulty if affect does not work properly (Wang Chuming, 2001). According to Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, affective variables, such as anxiety, motivation and self-confidence may impede or facilitate the delivery of input to the language acquisition device. There can be "a mental block that prevents acquirers from fully utilizing the comprehensible input they receive for language acquisition" (Krashen, 1985). This block, called "the affective filter", might be because "the acquirer is unmotivated, lacking in self-confidence, or anxious" (Krashen, 1985).

This study attempts to investigate one of the most important individual factors influencing language learning: anxiety. Anxiety is one of the major factors in the domain of affective variables. Most previous studies abroad and in China all support the view that language anxiety plays an important role in directly or indirectly affecting language learning process.

1. Literature review

Since the 1980s, it has been realized that the success of second language acquisition is affected largely by learners' affective factors. Krashen (1985) suggests in his Affective Filter Hypothesis

that learners are distracted by affective factors in the language learning process. Among the affective variables, anxiety is the most crucial one, and language anxiety a kind of complicated mental phenomenon specific to language learning.

However, many previous researches in foreign language learning anxiety haven't come to any unanimous conclusion toward the effects of language anxiety. Horwitz (1986) attributed such inconclusive results of previous researches to the lack of a reliable and valid measure of anxiety specific to language learning, and developed the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) in order to cater for this specific need to measure foreign language anxiety. Ever since its first appearance, the FLCAS has caught the attention of many researchers and language teachers. It has been examined from different angles, such as its reliability and validity, its theoretical construct, and its effect on different language skills (Aida, 1994; Ganschow & Spark, 1996; Horwitz, 1986; Trylong 1987; Young, 1986).

Although, the scale is influential in western countries, it has not received adequate attention in China. Nevertheless, China is a nation that has the world's most foreign language learners. Recently, many researchers and foreign language teachers have done some research in this field, which is mainly concerning the introduction of the FLCAS and some quantitative studies that have appeared in the southeast areas of China. But the subjects of most these studies are limited in only language learners at one learning stage, such as college students, middle school students or little kids in primary school.

2. Research methods

The author, with the consideration of testing the effect of language anxiety by using the FLCAS in Chinese context, especially in the northwest areas and the belief that language learning does not have any clear-cut division of learning proficiency, conducted a study to compare foreign language anxiety in middle school students and college students. This study examined the relationship between language anxiety and language performance based on the data analysis of the two groups, and compared their different manifestations of language anxiety.

The study includes a questionnaire research and an interview study. 336 subjects from three middle schools and 306 subjects from three colleges in Lanzhou participated in the questionnaire research and 36 subjects of high and low anxiety groups and 9 teachers who are then teaching these subjects took part in the interview study. The grades of three English exams for all subjects were collected and the average grades were computed as the measurement of their language achievement. The correlation coefficients between the FLCAS scores of all subjects and their average grades were computed to test the effect of language anxiety. A one-way ANOVA was run to further compare mean differences among different anxiety groups. Finally, inter-group comparison was made to compare the manifestations and effects of language anxiety at different learning stages.

3. Data analysis

3.1 The comparison of FLCAS scores between two groups

The main purpose of this study is to see if there are any differences in language anxiety at different learning stages. So the author compared the mean scores of FLCAS of the middle school group and the college group, and found out that the mean score of FLCAS of the middle school group (99.018) is much higher than that of the college group (96.193). (See table 1)

Table 1 Inter-group comparison of the mean of FLCAS

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Anxiety	College group	306	96.193	14.323	.819
	Middle school group	336	99.018	15.005	.819

The author then ran independent-samples test procedure to test if such difference was significant statistically. Levene's test of equality of variances shows that the variances of these two groups are assumed equal as p=.905, p>.05. The mean difference between the two groups is significant at .015 level, t=-2.435. (See table 2)

Table 2 Independent-samples test in inter-group comparison

Anxiety	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Equal variances assumed	.014	.905	-2.435	640	.015	-2.825	1.160
Equal variances not assumed			-2.440	638.576	.015	-2.825	1.158

3.2 Mean comparison of each component of FLCAS between two groups

From the data analysis of each group, the author found that the concern of English test causes more pressure to middle school students than the other three components. While in the college group, the fear of negative evaluation gives more pressure to college students. In order to test if such differences are significant between the two groups, the author made more detailed comparison through SPSS procedures and found quite informative results.

Table 3 provides the comparison of the mean scores of each component of FLCAS in the two major groups, from which we can perceive such a phenomenon: The mean score of each component in the middle school group, except general uneasiness of English class, is much higher than that of the college group. The author then ran independent-samples test to compare the mean score of each component of FLCAS in the college group and the middle school group in order to verify if such difference is significant statistically.

Table 3 Inter-group comparison of the mean of each component of FLCAS

Components	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
CA	College	306	2.996	.559	.032
	Middle school	336	3.065	.553	.030
NA	College	306	3.006	.614	.035
	Middle school	336	3.114	.635	.035
TA	College	306	2.856	.473	.027
	Middle school	336	3.125	.550	.030
GA	College	306	2.802	.486	.029
	Middle school	336	2.785	.534	.029

* CA= Communication apprehension; NA= Fear of negative evaluation;

TA= Test anxiety; GA= General uneasiness of English class

Table 4 Independent-samples test for each component of FLCAS between the two groups

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
CA	Equal variances assumed	1.877	.171	-1.578	640	.115	-.069
NA	Equal variances assumed	.042	.838	-2.175	640	.030	-.107
TA	Equal variances assumed	4.249	.040	-6.599	640	.000	-.268
GA	Equal variances assumed	3.047	.081	.424	640	.672	.017

Table 4 provides some quite different results from general data observation, that is, there is no significant difference in general uneasiness of English class (p=.672, p>.05) and communication apprehension (p=.115, p>.05) between the two groups. This indicates that the degree of communication apprehension and general uneasiness of English class felt by college students and middle school students are almost the same. While the mean difference of test anxiety in the two groups is significant at the level of .000, which means such difference is significant at 100% confidence. And the mean difference of fear of negative evaluation is also significant statistically (p= .03, p<.05).

4. Result discussion

The first research question is if Chinese EFL students experience language anxiety in their learning process and if there are any differences of language anxiety at different learning stages. From the data analysis we found that students in both groups experience quite high degree of language anxiety in their learning process. The mean score of FLCAS of the middle school group (99.018) is much higher than that of the college group (96.193). And we have discovered a significant difference exists in the FLCAS scores between middle school students and college students. The results of the one-way ANOVA confirmed such difference at the significance level of .015. So it's safe to conclude that significant difference in language anxiety exists at different learning stages. As concerned in this study, EFL students in middle school experience a comparatively higher anxiety in their English learning process than college students.

The second research question of this study is if there are any different manifestations of language anxiety at different learning stages. From more detailed intra-group comparison in the middle school group, the general manifestation form of language learning anxiety in middle school students is: Test anxiety is the most anxiety arousing component, fear of negative evaluation is the second, and communication apprehension the third, general uneasiness of English class is the last. The mean score of test anxiety is the highest in middle school students than the other three components. While in the college group, fear of negative evaluation is the component arousing the most anxiety, communication apprehension is the second one, then test anxiety, and similarly general uneasiness of English class is also the least anxiety-arousing component. So the general manifestation form of language anxiety differs at different learning stages in Chinese EFL students.

For the third research question of this study, the results of data analysis provided negative correlation between language anxiety and language performance in both groups. The comparison of the correlation coefficients between the FLCAS scores and course grades in different anxiety groups shows that the coefficients of high anxiety group in both middle school population and college population are the highest, which confirmed the results of many previous studies that language anxiety may impede language performance if students have higher anxiety degree (Aida, 1994; Chang, 1996; Gardner et al 1987; Ganschow et al 1994; Horwitz et al, 1986; MacIntyre and Gardener, 1991; Trylong 1987). There also exists a slightly different situation between the middle school group and the college group. That is, in the middle school group, the coefficients of high, average and low anxiety groups are all negative, which proves the debilitating effect of language anxiety. While in the college group, the coefficient of low anxiety group is positive, although such positive influence is not very remarkable. It also reveals some clues of facilitating effect of language anxiety in some certain circumstances.

The results of the present study confirmed the debilitating effects of language anxiety on Chinese EFL students' language performance. The author found that students in both groups do experience different levels of language anxiety and manifestations of language anxiety in both

groups differ greatly from each other. Data analysis shows that middle school students feel most anxious during language test while college students appear to fear negative evaluation. Students in both groups have the similar degree of communication apprehension.

5. Potential sources arousing language anxiety

Foreign language anxiety is a complex phenomenon resulted from various situations. The characteristics pertain to Chinese EFL students constitute one important facet to the question. A close review of the literature on anxiety in language learning identified six potential sources of language anxiety, which are presumed to exist commonly among language learners. Among the sources of anxiety reviewed, some were associated with learners, others with teachers and still others with the instructional practice. According to those articles, language anxiety arises from: 1) personal and interpersonal anxieties; 2) learners' beliefs about language learning; 3) instructor's beliefs about language teaching; 4) instructor- learner interactions; 5) classroom procedures; 6) language testing. The follow-up qualitative interview of middle school and college students verified that the same situation also happens to Chinese EFL students.

Apart from these sources, subjects in the present study, especially in middle school, also reported an anxiety produced by high expectation and even pressure from parents. And too much repetition or exposure to too many tests is also likely to cause weary and thus exert negative effects. Students in middle school were loaded with the deluge of test exercises. Such excessive exposure is likely to become mechanical drills that tend to deaden students' motivation and interests. When weary accumulates, anxiety is also likely to occur.

The uni-cultural context of Chinese EFL is another main reason to produce anxiety in language learning process. The term "uni-cultural context" refers to the language learning situation in which people have little contact with native speakers of a given target language, where a learner's values, beliefs and customs are dominated by one's mother tongue. In such a context, people's learning of a language is mostly oriented by academic purposes. In the present study, background investigation shows that 92.9% subjects in middle school and 76% in the college group learn English for academic purpose. And such a context is also likely to produce anxiety in communication. Students have few chances to communicate with native speakers. Most students in both groups had no experience in communicating with native speakers.

Many teachers and students complain that there are too many materials that should be covered in one class time or semester. The amount of course work is often an administrative function over which teachers have little control. Teachers feel they don't have any extra time for more classroom activities and students feel they could not digest all of them, and are afraid of being left over.

Students' low proficiency was also found to be the major source of their language anxiety. Language anxiety aroused when learners did not know how to answer teachers' oral questions. Also, they became anxious when they could not understand their teachers or could not read the materials. In a word, low proficiency in any one of the four skills would make the learners

anxious and hamper anxious students' English learning seriously. The interview to teachers and students also illustrated how low proficiency causes the anxiety.

This paper provides a brief summary of language anxiety study in northwest China, which may be helpful for language instructors and researchers to raise awareness of the negative role that language anxiety plays in EFL classroom. The recognized potential sources of anxiety in this study will be warning signals for English teaching and learning in Chinese context. The significance of the present study lies in how to help language teachers adopt effective methods to improve students' language performance by taking active and efficient measures in a Chinese context to overcome harmful emotional experiences that may impede language achievement.

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